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# The Artist-entrepreneur in the New Creative Economy

Richard Fletcher

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# Journal of Design and Management

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## Design and the Art of Management THEMED ISSUE

### THE DENVER BIENNIAL OF THE AMERICAS

Bruce Mau

### DESIGN THINKING

Bauer and Eagen

### DANCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Rowe and Smart

### BUILDING DESIGN CAPABILITY

Sung and Chang

### INTERACTION DESIGN AND INNOVATION

Holmlid

### DESIGN METHOD AND COLLABORATION

Vaughan, Stewart, Dunbar and Yuille

### DESIGN PROCESSES AND TOOLS

Robertson

### STRATEGIC PLANNING, ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Rubinyi

### DESIGNING INNOVATION INTO ORGANIZATIONS

Costello, Mader and Gatto

### THE ARTIST ENTREPRENEUR

Fletcher

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# Design and the Art of Management — *themed issue*

Ken Friedman, Laurene Vaughan and Jonathan Vickery

The editors of *Aesthesis* have been thinking of new approaches to 'the art of management' – or perhaps thinking about new ways to approach old problems. It seemed natural for us to think of design and design thinking as central to this intellectual endeavour – design is the process by which designated problem-solvers address the problems of legitimate stakeholders using innovation and creativity. But design is more than just problem solving. Design engages the sensibility, and designed artefacts take their shape in terms of feeling and form as well as function. The papers submitted for this issue on design, management, and organization covered all those areas and more.

In different shapes and guises, the articles in this issue all merge on the subject of 'design thinking', whether looking at 'tools', processes, experience or interactions. In terms of subject matter, the term 'design' in this issue emerges as a dynamic element of investigation into organizational learning, collaborative networks, product development, organizational resource management, service capability development, strategic urban planning, organizational creativity, contemporary art, and the conceptual-philosophical content of the epistemic functions of design that give us frameworks to think, create, assess, analyse and evaluate. Design always involves three great questions. How do we make things? How do we make things work? How do we make things work better?

Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon (1982: 129) defines design as the process by which we '[de]vise' courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.' Creating something new or reshaping something that exists for a purpose, meeting a need, and solving a problem, are courses of action toward a preferred situation even though we may not yet be able to articulate this preferred situation. This definition therefore covers most forms of design.

Design is not necessarily an outcome, but rather a process. The verb 'design' describes a process of thought and planning, and this verb takes precedence over all other meanings. The word 'design' had a place in the English language by the 1500s; its first written citation dates from the year 1548. Merriam-Webster (1993: 343) defines the verb design as 'to conceive and plan out in the mind; to have as a specific purpose; to devise for a specific function or end'. Related to these definitions is the act of drawing, with an emphasis on the nature of the drawing as a plan or map, as well as 'to draw plans for; to create, fashion, execute or construct according to plan'.

The American architect and designer Buckminster Fuller (1981: 229-231) describes design as the difference between a 'class-one evolution' and 'class-two evolution'. Class-one evolution is natural evolution according to Darwin, the natural phenomena studied through evolutionary biology. Class-two evolution involves 'all those events that seem to be resultant upon human initiative-taking or political reforms that adjust to the change wrought by the progressive introduction of environment-altering artifacts' (Fuller 1981: 229). Design is both intrinsic and essential to human development in a fundamental sense, but also creates artefacts that change the very context of that development.

One argument for the importance of design is the increasing number of areas now subject to human initiative. The vast range of technologies that surround us mediate most of the human world and influence our daily lives. These include the artifacts of information technology, mass media, telecommunication, chemistry, pharmacology, chemical engineering, and mechanical engineering, along with the designed processes of nearly every service industry and public good now available other than public access to nature. Within the next few years, these areas will come to include the artifacts of biotechnology, nanotechnology, and the new hybrid technologies.

Fuller's metaphor of 'the critical path', which was the title of his last book (1983), articulated a scenario where our world is as much subject to disintegration as it is development or growing better. The way that the new artificial world affects the natural world has immense ramifications that parallel Fuller's idea of class-two evolution. This is what Victor Margolin (2002) called 'the politics of the artificial', where design has become so intrinsic to our environmental development that we need seriously to assess its power, and create new boundaries, ethics and agreed protocols.

Design plays a role in the evolution of an increasingly manufactured world, from ordinary objects to advanced technology. The design process takes on new meaning as designers take on increasingly important tasks. These tasks are important not because designers are more visible and prestigious, but because design has greater effects and wider scope than ever before. Despite this scope and scale, however, robust design solutions are always based on and embedded in specific problems. In Jens Bernsen's (1986) memorable phrase, the problem comes first in design. Each problem implies partially new solutions located in a specific context. The continual interaction of design problems and design solutions

generates the problematics and knowledge of the field.

Design as an activity translates utilitarian, symbolic, and psychological needs into functions; it translates needs and wants into ideas; and it translates these ideas into the structural descriptions and entities to produce required functions that satisfy needs. As such, design always serves strategic goals on some level, large or small. The different forms of professional design practice require a process incorporating the strategic and managerial aspects of design as well as the hands-on developmental application of design. These move from thinking, research, and planning at one end of the process, on to manufacture, assembly, packaging, and presentation at the other.

For business firms, design is a comprehensive part of an integrated process that links selecting challenges and solving problems to developing products and marketing them successfully. For business firms, design is a comprehensive part of an integrated process that links selecting challenges and solving problems to developing products and marketing them successfully. The immaterial forms of design process have long been hidden, and now we are in the midst of a transition. Getting from one point to the next in this complex map of process, project, and product requires 'design thinking'. Design is in the business literature and designers are being brought in to organizations as they seek new ways of being, working, and producing. It is an exciting time of evolution. The literature on design thinking and the role and contribution of design to the fields of organizational and business development is expanding – and this issue of *Aesthesis* is part of this process.

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FEATURE

# The Artist-entrepreneur in the New Creative Economy

Richard Fletcher

'New knowledge is available at little or no cost to those who are on the lookout, full of curiosity and bright enough not to miss their chances.'  
Fritz Machlup<sup>1</sup>

In the new emerging creative economy, the entrepreneur and the artist appear as conjurers, or at least, everyone hopes they will make appear economic value and cultural meaning where previously there was none. It is understandable, that over the past two decades of manufacturing and service sector decline in the West, and now global economic recession, it is expected that the creative sectors will pull cash-stuffed rabbits out of their hats.

Looking further ahead are popular writers Jeremy Rifkin and Richard Florida, who see an inevitable and permanent reduction in the amount of human labour required in all but the most creative, knowledge intensive tasks, placing the creative industry in a strategic position with regard economic leadership and development. Another post-industrial thinker, Yoneji Masuda, not only sees the first fully automated factory appearing in around ten years time<sup>2</sup> but also predicts that this latest industrial revolution is occurring at a speed several times faster than previous revolutions. In a theoretic leap of conjecture, coextensive with the utopian sociology of the 1960s, this situation has been cumulatively described as the post-industrial era, the post-scarcity economy, the media society, information capitalism, the knowledge economy, the network society, or any combination defining a new nexus of intangible, dynamic communication-centred activity. Economically, the trend has been to subcontract the

Image courtesy of the Custard Factory



developing world for one's agricultural, manufacturing and now even service sector needs, and get into techno-info-communication-knowledge based industries. One increasingly important sector of these industries – both economically as well as symbolical – is communication-based, cultural, creative or 'tacit-knowledge' businesses. Speaking at the recent UK Government-sponsored *Digital Britain Summit* in London in April 2009, the British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, stated that the creative industries would for Britain be the 'driver' out of the global recession.

Given the open sky of technological and communications development in the 1990s, and the obvious immeasurability of the potential of 'creativity', the increasing political investment in the creative industries is no surprise. The creative industries stimulate wild optimism, but are also broad enough in their intellectual scope to be appropriated by government policy in diverse areas, social, cultural and economic. Facilities for the creative industries have become stock-in-trade for urban reconstruction and 'regeneration' strategies worldwide. International competition among design agencies for top 'creatives' is fierce. Yet the blurry nature of creative, cultural and knowledge sectors makes a definition infuriatingly vague, no doubt as vague as definitions of concepts such as creativity, culture or knowledge. Richard Florida's now debated definition identifies a tiny 'super-creative core', who conjure up ideas that are then put to use by 'creative professionals'. The addition of a rising clerical army of 'technicians', who use technology-specific genres of creativity in their work, broadens the eponymous creative class even further. Silicon Valley would appear to be a hot spot for the creative industries; however, despite its prodigious level of technological invention, the area remains a dull industrial park with no 'soul' or sense of creative location; it is creativity without social or cultural environment. Clearly, both the head and the heart can be creative, but the end results could hardly be more different. History is littered with examples of 'golden ages' where both art and science have flourished together, but the result can entail a bifurcation of human resources and split in the appropriation of human energies, art and science learning from each other but then going their separate ways. The result is not necessarily sustainable unified economic development, and not a transformation in the socio-cultural context. If business is confined to a linear process that runs from production line, to market, to the balance-sheet, then to shareholders profits, then it will not result in genuine economic development.

The 'artist-entrepreneur', however, is an emerging professional identity that sees a role mid-way between the internal idea-focus of the artist, and the external market-focus of the entrepreneur, and holds something of an insight for genuine economic development. As a definition it attempts in some way to conceptualise the professional role of the cultural industries worker that moves beyond sector specific task entrenched labour. For them, the song is not the artwork, the festival is. The canvas is not the artwork, the gallery is. Using the words of Donald Olsen, they see 'the city as a work of art', even though in reality they are limited to a certain 'creative quarter' of that city.

In this article I turn over views on this new professional role of 'artist-entrepreneur' gleaned in dialogue with staff from four creative companies in the 'creative quarter' of the UK's second largest city, Birmingham.

The quarter is officially known as The Custard Factory<sup>3</sup>. Built over a century ago as a custard factory, it now houses over a hundred creative companies – from design and marketing agencies to artist's studios, craft workshops and media suites, and is serviced by a central administration, with public galleries, independent shops and restaurants, one of Birmingham's biggest nightclubs and live music venues.

The companies I consulted were in some ways typical of small enterprises in any other sector, the advantages being flexibility, room for individual passion, and the ability to cater to niche audiences. On the other hand, as entrepreneurial creative industries, involved in a fast moving 'reactive' relation to the market (or client's needs) for them standard business strategy and planning is much harder, certainly in the long term, and growing the general infrastructure of the business beyond their small number of employees is also problematic given the specific skills-set and business capital invested in each one. The primacy of the creative individual is one of the characteristics of the creative firm. Even though the structure of production in the creative industries is project-based and team-driven, the individual plays a pre-eminent role in contract procurement, client relations, idea-generation



Photo: Richard Fletcher

and creative execution, and so on. In what follows I will refer to the artist and entrepreneur as though they were separate individuals, in many cases they are better viewed as two dimensions of the same individual.

## Strategic direction

There is no shortage of ideas, big or small, within the Birmingham organizations I consulted. Ideas can be plentiful, and practically leap out at the individual who, according to Machlup, maintains a certain professional poise – characterised as ‘on the lookout, full of curiosity’. The difficulty lies in the ability to sift through the possible to identify the probable within a strategic context. Whereas the artist might be content to continue exploring their ideas ‘internally’, purely on the level of expression – an exercise in visual semantics and hermeneutics – the entrepreneur is immediately pushed up against the external, vicious scepticism of the market, and selects ideas that have the potential to be ‘born’ into this reality. The key factor in an ideas-selection process in our company context is its notional suitability to the public or private market, and for the creative industries the ‘social-public’ is as much a market reality as ‘commercial-private’. The product and process, whether it is a design, a novel or a performance, can have value to both, depending on its direction. This juggling of objectives in distinct (opposing?) markets gives the creative organizations a schizophrenic character. Given that ‘creativity’ is their essential ingredient, they are socially and culturally driven, but still need to retain a substantial amount of business ‘bite’. In my Custard Factory companies, despite the fact that social or public commissions (and or public funding for social projects) offer an intrinsic social and cultural value and content, there was still a general preference for the (paradoxical) ‘freedom’ of the private market. One creative worker remarked that a public commission seemed frequently to be ‘more trouble than it’s worth’. Another made a clear association with imprisonment, saying that ‘I’ve done my time’ in the public sector. Creative workers lie between the contradiction that social-cultural contexts do not themselves provide the freedom (economic, management, organization) needed for creativity, but of course private business, offering that freedom, has no immediate value-laden social-cultural context with which to engage.

My Custard Factory organizations all have strategic visions that are driven by the socio-cultural ideals of the individuals that direct them. Could the constant mis-direction and dis-alliance of our public and private markets make the development or sustainability of their enterprises problematic? There seems to be a sad resignation that the public-social sectors, often driven by a mindset of political vote-gathering, is not quite living up to its potential and thus does not in itself offer a ground for genuine sustainable development. This is ironic, as it is the markets that are in constant flux, not the world of public institutions. The length of a typical public funding period for social or cultural projects (even for ‘Regularly Funded Organizations’, now an officially favoured genre of Government funded organization) has been seen to be painfully brief. The scope and scheduling of the contractual relationships forged in the private market, however, are more straightforward, if at times brutal. The artist-entrepreneurial spirit can allow such organizations to ‘jump’ from one market to the other, but this can quickly lead to employee burnout for the less resilient. New national legal structures for new generation ‘social entrepreneurial’ companies, such as ‘social enterprises and community interest’ companies, were identified as a step in the right direction. However, even the Social Enterprise Coalition admits that ‘..There is still an ongoing debate among practitioners and academics over the exact definition of social enterprise’<sup>4</sup>. Asking public and private organizations to suddenly ‘jump into bed’ with each other over joint concerns is naïve, but it can be broadly seen that the artist-entrepreneurs’ work suffers from being recognised and the conditions for the development of this role are not coming together.



Image courtesy of the Custard Factory



# Intellectual property

What is the value of an idea? Nothing if it is common knowledge and nothing if it is completely unexposed; there's a joke in the industry – the only way to protect IP is never to tell anyone. Copyrights and the ability to exploit intellectual property economically have been at the core of the creative industries for centuries; but they have always been difficult to manage. The collapse of the music industry is one of the most relevant places to look to for current management issues in IP soon to hit film, literature and design. Many of the issues seem contradictory. For instance, it has been shown in a number of studies,<sup>5</sup> that the most active music pirates are also often the most enthusiastic (legal) consumers. The recent changes in consumption show a shift in society's value of music, from the physical to the experiential. Much of the established industry was either unwilling or unprepared to accept this. With an abundance of creative and cultural products available to the average consumer (whether legal or not), creative industries must, more than ever, break down the real value of their products. Are your customers buying a lifestyle, an experience, something that gives them prestige? How much can be given away without damaging the value of what you are expecting consumers to actually pay for? Difficult questions of course, but if the alternative is ignoring the problem, dragging your heels, throwing your customers in jail, or irritating countless more for their own 'protection', then these are questions anyone who creates IP must ask.

The Custard Factory companies seemed well aware of the challenges and opportunities they faced with the 'value' created by the artist-entrepreneur. The most valuable piece of IP for them was not in fact within the services or products provided, but in the relation between the service/product and their brands' overall identity – its ability to symbolise the unique nature of the organization. The artist-entrepreneur relishes standing alone in the marketplace. It may be a niche market, but they are the only ones who understand it, often having played a key role in the establishment of their own localised market (the gallery circuit, the music scene, etc.). The main challenge identified here was the legal trouble involved in challenging the theft of IP, especially when taken on an international context. Political relationships between nations add a further layer of complexity when attempting to fight infringements overseas. There is unlikely to be a satisfactory conclusion to IP problems any

time soon, but education is at least a step in the right direction, combined with an amount of hard-headed fatalism: one of my interlocutors stated: 'When you're talking to artists and creating training programmes for them, it's always at the top of their list of requirements. But you can't protect an idea, and I don't think you'll find anyone in this business who hasn't been shafted one way or another. I have.'



Photo: Richard Fletcher



Photo: Richard Fletcher

# Globalisation

One of the paradoxes of culture, is that even though it emerges from the particularity of a language, identity and people, cultural and creative products are often the most marketable internationally – beyond their cultural borders. My Custard Factory organizations were well aware of this, and made particular reference to the UK Department of Trade & Industry [now bifurcated into the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform and the botched Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills] as being the main public organization helping them tap into the global market. However, the main concern among the organizations is on competition for the 'next generation' of artist-entrepreneurs. Versatile creative workspaces and cheap residential space is identified as being in short supply, and the individuals tipped to continue driving economic growth are suspected to be 'turned off' by overpriced, corporate-style living. The 'gentrification' argument (the renovation and commercialisation of de-industrialised – affordable – work spaces) has been specifically backed up by Florida's and Rifkin's research. Professional technical opportunities are being lost to countries that have better supported the manufacturing sectors in which these skills are put to use: 'While our colleges are closing down specialist courses, China is repositioning itself as 'designed in China, not just made in China' and opening up hundreds of new colleges.'

There is both hope and cynicism around 'culture-led urban regeneration' as a factor in giving towns or cities or urban regions a competitive edge. Artificially zoned areas, such as 'creative clusters' and 'creative quarters', can attempt to carbon copy established cultural centres, but cannot mimic their creative-cultural developmental process. The Hoxton and Shoreditch areas of London are examples of urban areas that became 'creative' simply through the availability of cheaper studio and production space, with artists and designers moving there of their own accord – call it spontaneous random collectivity. The Custard Factory emerged the opposite way: a local business entrepreneur took advantage of the large cheap factory space abandoned in the process of urban de-industrialisation, renovating it in the minimal way tolerable only to creative firms, the space is now let out at a cheap rate of rental. His motives were not entirely commercial, as he enjoys the way the Custard Factory has given an opportunity to many start-ups and creative enterprises, most of which run at a year on year loss for the first five years of their business life.

Many of the Custard Factory artist-entrepreneurs stated that although it was of some use to be clustered in a facility such as the Custard Factory, they would simply be doing business elsewhere if it didn't exist, providing of course they could afford it. The traditional 'clustering' of trades in the same urban area or part of a city, engaged in mutual support, information and skills exchange, attracting a great passing trade, is not necessarily conducive to a creative engagement with the market. These areas typically attract 'Bobos', the bourgeoisie-bohemians identified by 'comic sociologist' David Brooks,<sup>6</sup> who combine a counter-culture image with typically middle class values. This can entail a certain social homogenisation and reverse the economic advantages of a location for creative companies: for example, the following quote is taken from a letter of complaint sent to the mainstream breakthrough graffiti/street artist known as Banksy, who is now one of the most famous artists in the UK:

'I am writing to ask you to stop painting your things where we live...My brother and me have lived here all our lives but these days so many yuppies and students are moving here neither of us can afford to buy a house where we grew up anymore...Do us all a favour and go do your stuff somewhere else like Brixton [2006: 130]<sup>7</sup>

On a far grander scale, there also seems to be apprehension of the commercialisation of culturally significant goods. Like air or water, culture is a valuable yet immeasurable resource, the damage of which brings universal detriment. The tourist industry has become a de facto part of the creative industries, as well as a major client for creative agencies, culture is their business. However, the development of the tourist and destination industries can entail a bulldozing of local cultures with the construction of shining new hotels whether in the UK or around the world. Tourism is one of the major contributors to the new 'class-cleansing' of cities and the creation of a new social class system of habitation. Both Florida and Rifkin note that creative centres often show the greatest levels of basic economic inequality. The job opportunities created for a local population will sadly (to parody Dickens) have more of serving designer coffee about them, than of design. The lucky high-fliers of the creative class are genuine citizens of the world, able to follow opportunity wherever it lies, but this often entails taking the chance away from 'real locals'. Encouraging the creative industries does not in itself make for an equitable society in the face of manufacturing, service and agricultural decline: 'The emerging knowledge sector will be able to absorb a small percentage of the displaced labour, but not nearly enough to make a substantial difference in the rising unemployment figures.' [2004: 291]<sup>8</sup>

## Who is 'the artist'?

The 'artist' has an unstable and chameleon professional identity. An artist who applies their creative skills to commercial work is usually categorised as a 'designer', regardless of the nature of the art. As for the social-public environment, artists who work with an explicit 'social conscience' are often regarded to be inhibiting their 'pure' artistic productivity and excellence, even by other artists. However, our Custard Factory discussants agreed that generally the professional identity of the artist is consolidating around social-public projects and as a 'social agent'. The irony of this seems to be that an individual finds it difficult to gain respect as both commercial and a 'community' and a 'high art' practitioner, becoming too easily pigeonholed. There appears to be no shortage of prospective artistic talent and artists available for our Custard Factory organizations to work with, for both private or public projects, but there are few artists who manage to maintain a stable economic existence except those who are the most career focused: 'There has to be a level of talent, but it's their business skills that will make or break them.'

The artist's qualifications or training also are of little relevance when being considered for collaboration or commission by such companies, even though artists are generally becoming more credible as 'professionals' in the marketplace. Professional development for artists – the transition from either the college or the studio to the working business environment – is not generally facilitated by either education or industry. Though the idea of more professional accreditation was roundly dismissed by many of my discussants, there was an acknowledgement that the current situation most artists face – post-education or post-studio, of sporadic one-off workshops as career development – is not providing creative organizations with the kind of collaborators they need. Perhaps the growth of artists' collectives can be seen as an attempt to give a structure to professional development that the market itself will never be able to provide. Collectives can either take the form of an entrenched studio sub-culture, which can institutionalise the worst sense of detachment from the market, or a craft-workshop structured environment, largely grounded in technical skills-based knowledge. Or, like the Custard Factory, artists can 're-invent' themselves as 'creative industries practitioners'.





Image courtesy of the Custard Factory

In these business-based environments artists can pool administrative resources, learn from each other and more effectively quantify their own skills-set for an intelligible marketplace. The consensus is generally that artists are only ever judged on the quality of their work, and aside from the usual 'not-what-you-know-but-who-you-know' argument, quality is nothing without application.

Finally, the most positive observation voiced by our discussants was that participation in artistic activity at a grassroots level is reckoned to be at an all-time high, especially among younger generations. This basic participation leads to wider interest, a growing market value and recognition of the socio-cultural goals of these organizations. It is the raw material of the industry, and to stretch the metaphor, new seams are being mined every day. The sea of amateur filmmakers, bands, writers, artists and event-makers represents huge market growth, made especially visible when groups collaborate for large projects, such as festivals. To make economic and cultural use of a practically infinite pool of raw talent shows what my creative companies do best, and why they are among the few who have succeeded.

## A call for clarity and vision

Through several millennia of Western aesthetic and economic thought, the basic identity of artist and of entrepreneur have remained elusive and still does. This is perhaps best illustrated in the conclusion of Hebert and Links' *The Entrepreneur* (1988). 'We may sacrifice realism on the one hand to gain precision, or we may give up precision on the other hand to gain realism. The choice we make determines the place of the entrepreneur in economic theory.' [1988: 159]<sup>9</sup>

This would suggest that the nature of the artist-entrepreneur is to slip through whatever cracks appear in any kind of intellectual structure we may erect to capture and study them. If they were not able to do so, there would be no aesthetic or economic 'frontier'

for them to explore and profit from. Clearly, this philosophy struggles to sit comfortably within government policy or a business plan. Reality without precision? Funding without statistics? Shades of grey? Phrases that would no doubt send a shiver down the spine of any risk-averse committee. Groups within education, health, and the police have all loudly complained of the creative-economic detriment caused by managerial hyper-accountability masking as democracy. Still, it would be rash to suggest that any organization spending taxpayer's money deserves the right to avoid articulating the value of its activities. The recent major UK Government commissioned report on the funding and governance of national art and culture – known as 'The McMasters' report', after its author<sup>10</sup> – has been praised for arguing in favour of a step away from bureaucratic box ticking and funding-body micro-management and towards a pure ideal of cultural and artistic excellence. But then who does not strive for excellence in their work? Of course, artistic excellence is the ultimate enigma for a 'box ticker'; perhaps





Image courtesy of the Custard Factory

we should be content in trying to support activity that simply has the *attempt* at the core of its existence. The crucial factor then becomes one of who is appointed to judge the worth of this activity, and this in itself points to a need for excellence in leadership. The successful artist-entrepreneur manages to fulfil economic, social and cultural goals while avoiding the disadvantages and advantages of each area. Sadly, the increasingly multi-sector nature of the organizations means that their work will become harder to define using the measurements of any one sector. This also leads to a great deal of confusion in separating the 'big three' knowledge, creative and cultural industries. I would argue it is apparent that through the current dynamic of jostling between private-corporate business, public-social governmental, and voluntary-charity sector, the real economic vitality of this 'big three' is slowly beginning to

coalesce, bringing a more comprehensive approach to economic development and sustainable growth. The unifying deterrents for sectors that rely so much on speed and innovation are clearly inertia and risk-phobia. It is far too easy to venerate the final product while repressing the memory of the troubled starts, life-changing risks and generative processes of the emergent stage in business development, the 'stage' left to the performative courage of the artist-entrepreneur. The artist-entrepreneur is the one most equipped for these new economic configurations, and who must currently be tenacious enough to grow and not wilt in the enduring storms of economic recession. //

## NOTES

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- 3: Where Donald Olsens' quote is clearly paraphrased in the main courtyard: 'The city IS a work of art'. See also Custard Factory founder Bennie Gray's various statements: [www.spaceorg.co.uk/happen.htm](http://www.spaceorg.co.uk/happen.htm); the Custard Factory is now just one of eleven projects run by Gray's organization, SPACE [Society for the Promotion of Artistic and Creative Enterprises].
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##### The Organizations

During this article I have referred to the interviewees and individuals as general representatives of the industry sector rather than as specific companies. I extend a great deal of thanks to them for their participation and advice.

##### Capsule

<http://www.capsule.org.uk/>

Birmingham's most innovative art and music promoters, with the ears of true fans and a DIY commitment providing a regular flow of cutting edge, vital new music and art.

##### Craftspace

<http://www.craftspace.co.uk/page.asp>

Craftspace is a crafts development organization who actively attempt to push boundaries and perceptions of craft practice, presentation and learning.

##### Tindal Street Press

<http://www.tindalstreet.org.uk/>

Heralded as 'the excellent and far-sighted Tindal Street Press' (Independent), this prize-winning independent publisher offers readers the best of contemporary regional fiction.

##### Visual

[www.visualforbusiness.com](http://www.visualforbusiness.com)

Visual is a new, unique and flexible service from Arts & Business West Midlands bringing high quality contemporary art to businesses and their employees.

Many thanks to Lara Ratnaraja (Business Link West Midlands) and Peter Chandler (Leicester Creative Business Depot) for their insight and guidance.

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Photo: Richard Fletcher

# REVIEW

## Exhibitions as experiments

Lucy Kimbell

An occasional visitor to Imperial College London, a university specialising in science, engineering and medicine, I am often drawn to the objects that are on display throughout the building. Come out of a lift, for example, and you are suddenly presented with some machinery in a glass case with all the gravitas of a museum piece, even though you are in a corridor. Despite a background in engineering design, I find it hard to 'read' these objects, but I welcome their being there. They serve to remind visitors and regular building users how scholarship and innovation are tied up with material artefacts. In my own institution, Said Business School at Oxford, which opened its first university museum in 1683 (the Ashmolean), we are starting to design our own collection of objects. Inspired by my colleague, business historian Chris McKenna, we are developing a collection of management artefacts, to be arranged around the business school, bringing to attention the technologies implicated in the work of managing and organising. From 2x2 matrices to early fax machines, we think it's important to make present the artefacts that have become invisible to many people, but without which managing and organising does not happen. This collection may not bear the historical weight of the objects in the Ashmolean, but like that museum, which was a site for public demonstrations of scientific experiments, we aim to use the exhibition format as a place of experiment (Macdonald and Basu 2007).

For practitioners and scholars interested in art and design, contemporary exhibition practice offers a valuable way to learn about, think about and experience art and design. Exhibitions can be sites for the generation, and not just the reproduction of knowledge (Macdonald and Basu 2007). Three exhibitions held in the UK in 2008 offer different ways to think about what exhibitions do, with quite different modes of engagement and argument.

*Wouldn't it be Nice... Wishful Thinking in Art and Design* was at Somerset House, London; *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970*, was at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London; and *Imagining Business*, which I was involved in curating, was at Said Business School, Oxford. Organized and supported by quite different institutional arrangements, the three exhibitions had some important similarities. All three included works by both artists and designers. All three claimed to be staging an argument. But perhaps the important difference – and this relates back to the opening paragraph – was the situation of the third exhibition, held in my own institution during a scholarly workshop to which the exhibition was connected and for which it raised uncomfortable questions.

*Wouldn't it be Nice... Wishful Thinking in Art and Design* at Somerset House coincided with the London Design Festival, when the city was briefly full of designers and their work, in public spaces, shops or studios as well as the large institutions [See Fig. 1]. Previous versions of this show had been in Geneva and Zurich, and its genesis included master classes and symposia at art and design colleges in Switzerland, in which some of the exhibitors were involved. In their foreword to the catalogue, Katya García Antón, Jean-Pierre Greff, Christian Brändle and Hans-Peter Schwarz (García Antón et. al 2007) explain the exhibition aimed to do two things. Firstly, it explored the intellectual and physical territories of and boundaries between art and design. Secondly, it aimed to share 'some modest utopias' (García Antón et. al 2007: 34).

What this meant in the exhibition was that visual artists, graphic designers, fashion designers, product designers and others had their work shown side by side, without it being labelled as either art or design. As for the modest utopias, the work selected for the exhibition – much of it shown for the first time – was in the realm of proposals or design propositions (Romme 2003). Coming mostly from Europe, the exhibition contributors did indeed seem to be exploring both present and possible futures,

but with a twist. The duo Dunne and Raby are well-known as exponents of what they call 'critical design' (Dunne 1999), in which design practice takes on a role of intervening into contemporary problems through making artefacts for display and engagement. In this show, Dunne and Raby presented work from *Technological Dreams Series: No.1 Robots* (2007). This took the form of short films in which strange objects (the robots) – able to move and make noises – interacted with a woman whose cautious enquiries prompted both humour and anxiety. In the gallery, the projection of the highly stylised film showing these encounters, with the objects on the floor in front, served to make visible the various layers in construction of the work.

Martí Guixé, who calls himself an ex-designer, also presented work which could be termed critical, in his case a critique of the institutions that serve to valorise some kinds of objects and cultural production. He showed his Museum Guixé which, at first glance, appears little more than a few things arranged on a blanket, inspired by street vendors who can wrap up their wares in seconds and disappear if trouble comes. Adopting this form as a structure for a museum highlighted how such institutions operate both as a system of display and of retail. This was one of the most uncomfortable works in the show – avoiding the visual seduction associated with consumerist design, but remaining in mind for weeks after.

As a whole, this exhibition presented a vision of design and art practices playing a role in visualising futures but without any hint of the techno-utopias that are sometimes implicated in this kind of activity. These futures were pragmatic rather than visionary, institutionally aware rather than politically naïve, contextually aware rather than simplified.

The second exhibition, *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970*, was organized by the V&A (Crowley and Pavitt 2008), an internationally-known museum of design and the decorative arts part funded by the UK government [See Fig. 2]. The exhibition title makes clear its intention – to present an argument about the effect of the Cold War and the post-war political settlement on design. Including work by many different kinds of designer – from architecture, to fashion and product design as well as work by film-makers and visual artists – this show was a highly crafted experience in which the visitor walked through a carefully constructed scholarly argument in material form. There is not space here to discuss it in detail, but a couple of elements stand out. The rebuilding of post-war Berlin and Moscow, for example, turned into a material reality the political visions that were enacted in those cities. Stalinist aesthetics with plenty of ornament and expensive materials were followed, after Stalin's death, by an industrial architecture in which a new life was imagined for a world free of the friction caused by possessions (Crowley and Pavitt 2008: 147).



Figure 1: *Wouldn't it be Nice... Wishful Thinking in Art and Design* © Somerset House



In industrial and product design, the development of European industries was supported by funding from the Marshall Plan between 1947-1952. Containing the threat of communism was tied to developing consumer societies, and this led to Marshall Plan support for Italian design industries, for example, during a period when iconic designs such as Piaggio's Vespa were produced. The propaganda went both ways. An exhibition of Italian artisanal and industrial design in 1950 called *Italy at Work* toured 11 institutions across the USA, funded by the Italian government and ultimately supported by American money (Crowley and Pavitt 2008: 81). This exhibition and the handsome catalogue that accompanied it offer a densely argued account of how global politics shaped design, and how anxieties about communism and consumerism were worked by artists, designers and film-makers into the things they made, whether these were posters, furniture or films. As Crowley and Pavitt argue, 'Design was not a marginal aspect of the Cold War but central – both materially and rhetorically – to the competition over the



Figure 2: Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970 © V&A Museum.

Photo: Maja Kardum

future' (Crowley and Pavitt 2008: 14).

The final exhibition, *Imagining Business*, was one I was involved in organizing in collaboration with sociologist Nina Wakeford and curator Alex Hodby (Hodby et. al 2008) [See Fig. 3]. The exhibition came about when my colleague Paolo Quattrone told me about an academic workshop he was organizing with Christine MacLean and François-Regis Puyou at the school. Their event had a focus on understanding visibility and visual objects with the title *Imagining Business: Reflecting on the Visual Power of Management, Organising and Governing Practices*. I proposed an exhibition of work to accompany the workshop by artists and designers who, in different ways, were involved in imagining business or making visible how it is imagined. The exhibition was open for three weeks, reaching an audience of visitors and day-to-day building users as well as the workshop participants. This was a modest affair which aimed to show projects that made manifest ideas about organising and managing in works situated around the school. Design consultancy *live|work*, for example, help their clients uncover potential for new services, typically using visual methods. The consultancy showed large posters from a project for a client which produces data for other businesses. Before *live|work*'s involvement, the client gave its customers long paper sheets covered in numbers, an unreadable excess of data. The designers helped their client identify what customers needed, and designed a web-based tool for manipulating and visualising the numbers, in effect creating a new service enabling them to use the data.



Artist Chris Evans showed his Radical Loyalty project (2002-ongoing), in which he plans to build a sculpture park in Järvakandi, Estonia. The sculptures intended for the park follow his conversations with senior executives from large organizations working in retail, telecoms, energy and other industries, asking them to describe what they understand by 'radical loyalty'. Evans has created sketches and maquettes for the sculptures which will eventually be built in Estonia by artisans whose job under Soviet occupation was to create public monuments. In this and other projects, Evans muddles the role of artist, patron, entrepreneur and muse, here, working as an intermediary between executives, artisans, and visitors to the future sculpture park. The exhibition included signage from the park and a booklet which included sketches and descriptions from Evans' interviews.

As part of the academic workshop, I organized a walk around the exhibition accompanied by some of the contributors giving an introduction to their work, with sociologist Noortje Marres as discussant responding to each work as we visited it in turn. This was an experiment, in an exhibition which itself was an experiment. Conceived of as a kind of paper in material form, the exhibition was created to complement and contribute to an academic workshop in which researchers typically present from their (written) papers accompanied by slides of images. We dispensed with the text and Powerpoint and instead walked around looking at artefacts, a process of observation and discussion that was unusual in a management conference.

Considered together, the three exhibitions discussed here share the idea that exhibitions are sites in which visitors can experience and study artefacts and learn from them and about them. Where they differ is, perhaps, the discussions and knowledge that they attempt to contribute to. Viewed through the lens of Macdonald and Basu's (2007) idea that exhibition practice is a site for knowledge generation, not just reproduction, the exhibitions did different things. The first exhibition, *Wishful Thinking...* was open to the general public but publicised within a design festival and sited in a building known for displays of design and art. It presented a vision of art and design practice as visualizing futures without the romantic, utopian or dystopian associations that often accompany such endeavours. At the V&A, producing a heavyweight exhibition and illustrated catalogue such as for *Cold War Modern* is a core part of the museum's practice, relating in different ways to its collection and many other formal activities. The visitor experience, catalogue and retail aspects brought together a coherent argument that the Cold War had an important effect on design over several decades of the 20th century.

The third exhibition described was the most slippery – neither a stand-alone exhibition supported by an organization used to producing such events, nor a fringe event at an academic workshop, it brought objects and practices that are usual in the other types of venue into a business school. It presented artefacts created by artists and designers within a context in which other kinds of object are usually attended to, whether spreadsheets, Powerpoint slides or – in scholarly workshops about visual artefacts – pictures of things. This siting of *Imagining Business* laid grounds for collisions during which new knowledge might possibly be generated. To what extent it was successful at doing so, other writers will have to judge. //

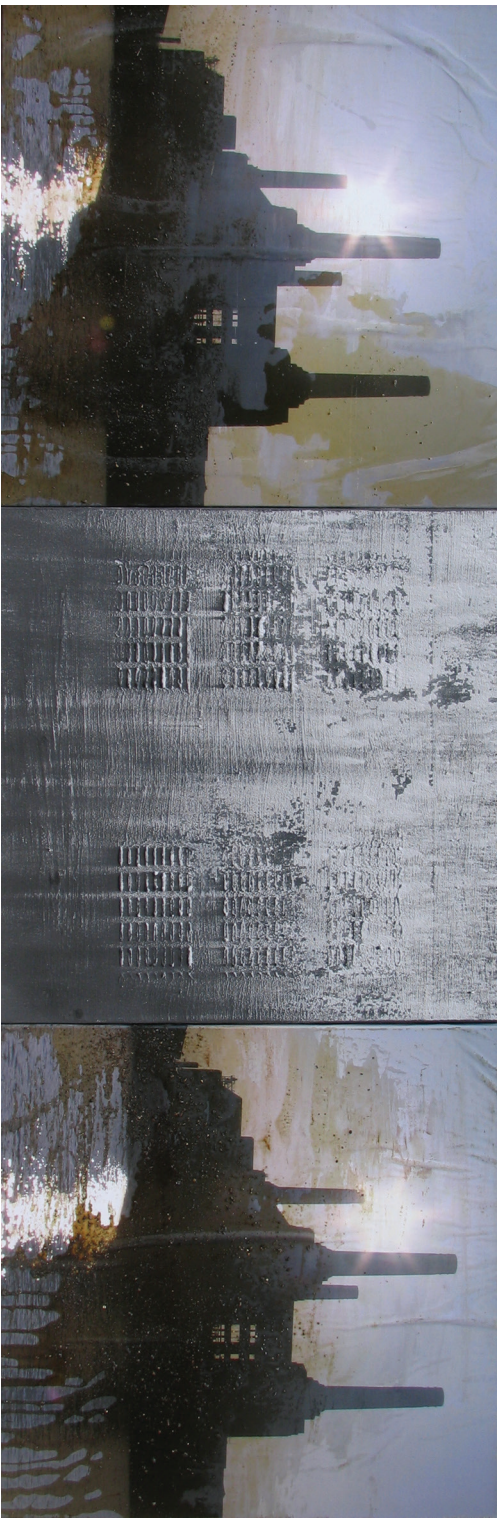
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